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"Beyond the Binary: Obama's Hybridity and Post-Racialization."

Kirin Wachter-Grene

1 Our dubious "postracial" era, as it has been articulated by the mainstream American media in the wake of the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama, suggests that the United States is now, finally, beyond race. Because we have historically elected the first "black" president, many in the media have questioned whether or not we are entering a color-blind age in which we no longer "see" race, nor allow it to determine our policies and interactions. Although postracial discourse – often understood as "color blind" discourse – has been circulating since the 1960s and 1970s in retaliation against social welfare programs such as affirmative action, simply electing the first "black" president has allowed postracial discourse to flourish in the mass media. Furthermore, it is a narrative that the president himself capitalizes upon to stress a universalized nationalism (Smith et al. 2011). However it is not a dominant dialogue nor an idea beyond critical questioning as evidenced by the proliferation of critics engaged in such action. As many have argued, the term "postracial" is a misnomer, considering that we still see skin color and behave according to our racist or antiracist perceptions and intentions, consciously or not. Furthermore, the critique of postracialism often relies on a rearticulation of the proliferation of racism, racialization, exclusionary practices, and other forms of systemic oppression still prevalent in the United States. These critiques tend to point out these forms of oppression directed at blacks, particularly black males, such as mass incarceration rates, joblessness, health care crises, and educational and economic disparity. This is done as a means to argue the absurdity of suggesting "postracial America," in that racialization continues to structure material realities for many people of color in the United States. This conversation is indeed crucial, for, as Tim Wise reminds us, it is only through a "color-conscious" approach, as opposed to a color-blind approach, that we can continue striving to understand racism and racialization as a means to eradicate it through direct action and policy changes (2010). However, critiquing postracialism solely from a perspective of color-consciousness fails to counteract the United States' nonproductive obsession with race and racialization. Additionally, the

standard critique of postracialism does not allow us to see that, through a broadening of postracialism's discursive potentialities, a progressive discourse of post-"bichromatic" racialization could develop, while still recognizing and honoring variegated ethnicities and cultures; a goal shared across antiracist movements (Chude-Sokei 2006, p. 11).

2 First, we need to consider why postracialism as it is posited by the media and capitalized upon by the Obama administration is dangerous, and second, in an attempt to engender a post-racist society, we need to consider extending the definition of postracialism to suggest that we have the potential to move into an era of post-racialization beyond that which has historically been based on an American bichromatic hierarchy. When I refer to racialization I mean the complex action, supposedly past, of discursively classifying a group of people racially. It also refers to the manner in which said group is then treated socially and politically in regards to race and its attendant stereotypes. Racialization can be an external process often known as racism, although the case is never this simple, such as in antiracist work, political mobilization, or social welfare policy development and enforcement. Racialization can also be an internal, intraracial process, commonly considered identity politics. Again, this is complex, for while internal racialization is often used for strategic solidarity and political mobilization, it sometimes forces the exclusion of those at its margins (Gilroy 2000).

3 In the context of American history and its legacy of chattel slavery and Jim Crow *de jure* segregation, racialization, as Jared Sexton articulates, is explicitly tied to blackness and the law of hypodescent, more commonly known as the "one-drop" rule (2008). Thus "postracial," as it has been simplistically posited by the mass media, signifies an era in which the United States is beyond the bichromatic color line that has indeed proven to be one of the most catastrophic problems of the 20th century and beyond. We know this is a falsehood; the United States is not fully beyond this bichromatic hierarchy in which race is simplified as a "black-white" divide. We also know that we cannot hope to alter bichromatic racialization if we silence discourses of race and cease to understand it as a powerful tool of social and political efficacy in the United States. However, can we explode and extend the discourse of postracialism from that of a bichromatic binary to one inclusive of the changing landscape of the United States in lieu of increased immigration? In other words, if we reframe postracial discourse to a discourse of post-racialization in which no one is easily categorized as "black" anymore in the ways "black" has been historically signified in the United States, can we consider the election of President Obama and his hybrid identity — as mixed race and second-generation immigrant — to be indicative of this potentiality?

Barack Obama: Postracialism's "Subjective Signifier"

4 In the simplest terms, Obama is the son of a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya. Thus, Obama is a second-generation immigrant, and his "blackness," is derivative of diasporic, African heritage. Obama's identity is a hybrid of not only "race" and ethnicity, but of immigrant/non-immigrant ancestry. However, many read Obama as bichromaticly multiracial, often as a means to continue a dialogue of this specific form of multiracial legitimacy. Others simply read him as "black." However his multiracialism is not a marriage of American bichromaticism, and his blackness is not synonymous to African American (meaning his blackness is not tied to an ancestry of American chattel slavery). Arguably, due to his hybridity he often struggles to publicly "perform" his race,

and this, combined with pragmatic, political reasons dissuades him from public projections of racialization or critical discourses of race in general (Smith et al. 2011). Thus one can argue that Obama functions as "postracialism's subjective signifier" in the mass media, meaning that, by being read as a symbolic embodiment of bichromatic racial healing, his subjectivity allows many in the mass media to question whether Americans have achieved a colorblind society.

5 A cursory Google search for "Obama post racial" brings up 60, 700, 000 results, many of which are from such reputable American news sources as *The New York Times*, CNN, and NPR. As David Hollinger points out, the American mass media tends to depict Obama as a postracial signifier for two primary reasons: first, his presentation of selfhood with minimum racialization, and second, his ability to mobilize millions of white voters (2008, p. 1033). However, while he engages in little internal racialization, within the United States Obama is most often externally racialized as "black," i.e. as an African American. Because of his external racialization as black and because he is president, the significance of Obama to a discourse of postracialism lies within the combination of "racial presence and state power" (Mukherjee 2009, 220). Here, in Obama's victory, "the tragic mulatto, deviant and difficult within biological matrices of race and racism, shape-shifts its way into an uneasy cultural truth that frames fetishized inclusion as proof of civility and rationality" (Mukherjee 2009, 220). This suggests that for many Americans, "the true cause for celebration is not necessarily the election of a Black president but that African Americans…have 'excelled' to white norms of success" (Teasley and Ikard 2010, 412). One need only recall then-vice presidential candidate Joe Biden's infamous quote that Obama is "the first mainstream African American who is articulate and bright and clean and a nice-looking guy" for proof of how some choose to interpret Obama's success in ways often affiliated with members of the black middle-class, i.e. in ways racialized as white. Secondly, in regards to the term "tragic mulatto," one realizes that it is not only Obama's "blackness" but his multiracial identity, read as bichromaticly multiracial, that allows the American mass media to posit him as postracialism's subjective signifier to suggest a transcendence of the bichromatic hierarchy. In doing so, this narrative serves to further democracy, and it is emblematic of the nation's desire to engage in psychic healing through symbolic gestures, while continually ignoring the socio-economic disparities of centuries of structural racism.

Universalized Nationalism/Neoliberal Colorblindness

6 To suggest that Obama's historic election signifies the end of more than a century of African American struggle for equity is to render material realities invisible and mute. To suggest as much, with such "uncritical exuberance" only severs the racial present from the past (Butler 2008). More specifically, Obama's rhetoric of hope does not create change in substantive material ways for Americans in general, and a black president does not, as we know, equate to socioeconomic progress for African Americans (Bobo 2011, pp. 19-20).

7 Arguably, and understandably, Obama fears the myth of being the president of "Black America." Rather he perpetrates the "uniter" myth by way of his universalized nationalist rhetoric. There were many in the media who speculated whether Obama would use his presidency to champion the political causes of African Americans or engage the nation in a critical racial dialogue akin to Martin Luther King Jr.. However, as a result of both the difficulty he has situating himself racially, and his pragmatic, political

rationalizing, Obama is hesitant to discuss race. He has explicitly stated that engaging in racial discourse will do nothing to improve American race relations. In an interview with *The New York Times* Obama states:

8 Obama believes, like many postracial thinkers, that race can no longer be mobilized as a political tool to enact social equity because it is divisive. He also believes, like many liberals and academics, that socio-economic class, not race, is the locus of contemporary social inequity, as if the two are easily separable (Wise 2010, pp. 36, 38, 42). Although Obama claims that every step his administration takes is designed to help "all people," by not engaging in a critical examination or discussion of the manner in which race and socio-economic class and status are often connected, or the manner in which race can be a critical tool in developing policy such as affirmative action, the Obama administration remains blind to the ineptitude of this "trickle down" philosophy of social welfare ("Washington Wire" 2009).

9 However, in considering the ways Obama has spoken about race, such as his famous "A More Perfect Union" speech delivered in the wake of his reverend Jeremiah Wright's "inflammatory" racial remarks, one must consider the complicated nexus of external racialization that determines how Obama can, and cannot, publicly discuss race and the social inequities derivative thereof (Wise 2010, p. 42). In the speech, Obama articulated an agenda of universalized nationalism dependant upon assumptions of shared hopes and values. He stated:

10 Obama suggests these shared hopes can only be achieved if we collectively move past racial wounds, or, perhaps, past racialization entirely. Indeed, racialization is arguably one factor that keeps America from progressing toward the "more perfect union" envisioned and called for. As such, this speech serves to represent the imagined community of the homogenous American union as one distinctly postracial. One could argue that Obama consciously constructs this universalized nationalism as a means to further democracy and strengthen national character, similar to the patriotic intentions of all American presidents. However, I argue that Obama's specifically colorblind discourse is presented in opposition to racialization. In other words, his universalized nationalist rhetoric can be interpreted as his conscious, yet unarticulated-as-such postracial gesture. It comes as a result of his personally ambiguous relationship to race, and from his hyper self-conscious awareness of his delicate position as the first "black" president of the United States and the racialized projections and fantasies this engenders.

11 Curiously, although Obama is reluctant and uncomfortable to serve as the locus of racialized or postracial projections, because his articulation of colorblind, universalized nationalism is in collusion with the American media's articulation of postracialism, he is its unavoidable signifier. The American media posits Obama as potentially representative of a force of healing transcendence. It is questioned whether Obama, as postracialism's subjective signifier, is capable of assisting the nation in surpassing racial wounds engendered by American slavery that have, prior to Obama's ascension, precluded many African Americans from full participation in society. This collusion between Obama's colorblind universalized nationalism, (which attempts to romanticize American racial relations, or silence a critical discourse of race as a means of political efficacy), and the mass media's questioning of postracialism resultant from Obama's election is ironic. In other words, by means of his own rhetorical gestures aimed to avoid critical discourses of race, Obama is in fact helping to reify a publicly articulated obsession with race as the media continually questions his identity politics. Thus, we begin to see how "postracial,"

as mobilized by the mass media, actually means "hyper-racial," as it continually fixates on bichromatic racialization, even as a means to negate it.

Obama and Internal Racialization

12 Because of his hybrid identity, Obama is often faced with questions regarding how he self-identifies. During his presidential campaign, when asked this by members of his multiracial constituency, Obama replied "I self-identify as African American — that's how I'm treated and that's how I'm viewed. I'm proud of it" ("Obama's Racial Identity Still an Issue," 2009). However, asserting that he self-identifies as African American because that's how he's externally racialized says nothing of how Obama self-identifies. It says nothing of his process of internal racialization, if such a process exists for him. As Afro-Caribbean scholar Louis Chude-Sokei suggests, "[immigrant] blacks feel cramped by the narrowness of American racial politics, in which 'blackness' has not just defined one's skin color but has served as a code word for African American. To be heard and to be counted, these black immigrants must often pass as African American, sometimes against their will" (2007). Obama of course knows that his blackness is derivative of African descent, yet he is astutely aware that he is culturally understood as African American based upon external racialization, and must, therefore, perform or "pass" as such. Indeed, if we examine the burgeoning racial consciousness Obama articulates in *Dreams from my Father*, we begin to see his uncomfortable relationship to African American blackness, and to race in general, ultimately leading to his privileging of colorblind universalized nationalism.

13 In his memoir, Obama references his frustration with his multiracial identity:

14 Obama is visually marked as "black," despite whatever frustrations and complications this might create for him. Being externally racialized as "black" disallows Obama from laying claim to a multiracial identity that projects "whiteness" or "individualism" as its foremost identity marker.

15 As his presidency has progressed, Obama has retreated from identifying himself in essentialized terms such as "African American." During his first press conference as president, Obama referred to himself as a "mutt." In the NPR story "Barack Obama: Face of New Multiracial Movement?" Farai Chideya speaks with Ralina Joseph, assistant professor in the Department of Communications at the University of Washington, andJungmiwha Bullock, president of the Association of MultiEthnic Americans (2008). In the interview, Joseph confesses that on a "personal level" she was happy to hear Obama refer to himself as a "mutt" during his first press conference, because it allowed a peek into Obama's "own racialization...in which many of us can read multiracial politics into." Bullock claims "there was a missed opportunity during the elections to talk about multiracial identity in a different way than we have before.... from the media's projection [Obama] had been cloaked as a single race category as the first black president, but I think there was a missed opportunity while he was talking about his mixed race identity but in a color blind sort of way."

16 I, however, understand Obama's assertion to be a post-racialization gesture, not a multiracial gesture. A multiracial gesture suggests one is still racializing oneself to include consideration of all one's racial components, perhaps privileging one above

others, or perhaps racializing oneself as "mixed race." A post-racialization gesture, on the other hand, might mean choosing to not consider one's racial identity at all.

17 Why wouldn't Obama want to embrace a post-racialized identity? It is specifically because of his hybridity that his performance of race is complicated. As he explicitly states, his memoir, in and of itself, is largely about the "search [for] a workable meaning for his life as a black American" (1995, p. *xvi*). In high school and college, while trying to lay claim to an "authentic" blackness, Obama often feels as if his "blackness" is at times a sham in comparison to some of his black friends such as Ray, who "don't need no books" to teach him "how to be black" (1995, p. 87) and the "authentically black" Marcus (1995, p. 101). Obama writes, "I can't even hold up my experience as being somehow representative of the black American experience" (1995, p. *xvi*), as if there is a homogenous "black American experience" with which to compare oneself to. Ashamed and confused by his "Africanness," Obama romanticizes it and constructs myths of royal ancestry (1995, pp. 60-63), before trying myriad ways to "pass" as a black American, such as Chude-Sokei suggests many black first and second-generation immigrants do. For Obama, these activities range from playing basketball, to his choices of diction, activities, influences, and self-posturing, all of which he self-consciously draws attention to in his memoir by writing, "I was trying to raise myself to be a black man in America, and beyond the given of my appearance, no one around me seemed to know exactly what that meant" (1995, p. 76). Again, a statement like this shows that Obama only self-identifies as African American because of the way he is externally racialized. Furthermore this shows Obama's understanding that race, and blackness, is socially constructed and performed. He writes, "I was living out a caricature of black male adolescence" (1995, p. 79) and later, "I had learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning (1995, p. 82)." Obama cannot find a comfortable self-identification in the performance of race in general, or by way of multiracialism or blackness in particular. He cannot, by way of negotiating bichromatic racialization make the "two worlds" of his multiracial identity "cohere" (1995, p. 82). Again, this is because his hybrid identity is more nuanced and complex than this, as is the case for so many people.

18 Obama expresses an uncomfortable personal relationship to race, especially in terms of feeling powerless to self-identify in ways that are not already socially determined, a feeling many people share (Hollinger 2011). Thus, it is not surprising that as president, he articulates colorblind universalized nationalism in an attempt to avoid critical race discourse. In other words, despite his caustic sarcasm that people are "only so grateful to lose [themselves] in the crowd [of] America's happy, faceless marketplace," (100), concretizing this ambiguous "American marketplace" or imagined American community is in fact a part of Obama's presidential agenda. He often utilizes "American Dream" rhetoric, as articulated in his second book *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*, and in many of his speeches. He believes in American idealism; the belief that somehow, his rhetoric will instigate our inherent "Americanness" and rally us to nation-building interactions inspired by our "common" destiny, desires, and values (Smith et al. 2011, p. 131).

19 Thus, arguably, because it takes the form of colorblind patriotism, we can understand Obama's universalized nationalism as a form of postracialism. As we know, postracialism downplays the potential to use race to enact political equity and instead focuses on its measure, or lack thereof, of social efficiency (Wise 2010, pp. 18-19). Furthermore,

postracialism not only obscures materialist conditions of people's lives, but it silences the "material realities of 'race' as a significant and determining factor in shaping interracial power relations" (Teasley and Ikard 2010, 411). Obama's historic victory, and his politics, have thus fueled postracialism's platform of racial silence. This is dangerous for many reasons such as those stressed by Roopali Mukherjee in his criticism of "neoliberal multiculturalism," a term arguably synonymous with neoliberal colorblindness. He argues "neoliberal multiculturalism and a withering liberal state collude with structures of racial privilege shaping the contours of new modes of racial injustice and power (2009, p. 220)." Therefore, regardless of Obama's postracial gesture in the form of universalized nationalism, what should be increasingly clear is that proclaiming Obama to be postracialism's subjective signifier is a simplistic discourse that at best lends itself to a lack of critical engagement, and at worse silences perpetual racism. Instead, we need to first consider the absurdity of reading Obama as such by examining the manners in which he is hyper-racialized as further proof of postracialism's failed promise. Second, we need to critically re-frame the conversation to consider how Obama can be read in a manner that allows for a discourse of post-bichromatic racialization.

Obama's External Hyper-Racialization

20 One need only analyze the ways in which Obama's race is imagined and purposefully mobilized by many American citizens to consider the hyper-racial discourse surrounding him. In the presidential election Obama won nearly unanimous support from black American voters, (Kuhn, 2008) a fact that has inspired heated debate as to whether or not blacks, as well as whites, voted for him largely because of his externally racialized blackness. In an article in the *LA Times*, David Ehrenstein suggests that Obama functions as a "Magic Negro;" a black person with "no past, [who] simply appears one day to help the white protagonist" (2007). In other words, Obama functions as an "idealized, less-than-real black man" in white America's postracial fantasy of benevolence and racial healing. Though "black," Obama is not "too black" i.e., dangerous, violent, hyper-sexualized, uneducated, the "ordinary nigger" of Obama's own caustic reflections. In electing him and his "benign blackness," white America is able to assuage its collective white guilt. Shelby Steele suggests "Obama seduced whites with a vision of their racial innocence precisely to coerce them into acting out of a racial motivation" (2008). He writes; " [Obama's] talent was to project an idealized vision of a post-racial America—and then to have that vision define political decency. Thus, a failure to support Obama politically implied a failure of decency" (2008).

21 However not all whites maintain a façade of "racial innocence." Obama certainly looks black enough to fuel the hatred of the radical right. Members of the mostly white Tea Party, a fringe, populist political group formed in the wake of his election, often depict Obama on their signage as a "savage" wearing a bone through his nose, or as a monkey; direct assaults on his immigrant ancestry. Obama staunchly refuses to acknowledge the abject racism at play in these attacks, even after the NAACP had policy passed in 2010 to hold members of the Tea Party accountable for racist slander. Again, in his refusal to acknowledge such racist bullying, Obama projects a colorblind universalized nationalism in which such acts of frustration, anger, and dissent cannot be legitimized as racist by anyone other than antiracist activists. In June 2010, results from a University of Washington poll of seven states was published, showing that members of the Tea Party

are in fact more likely to be racially resentful than the population as a whole. Perhaps Obama is partially correct in his suggestion that national anger has nothing to do with race, and rather it *is* socio-economic stressors that are causing such frustrations. However, while Obama's presidency has incensed citizens for its "big government" policies and procedures, it is undeniably his "blackness," and his immigrant blackness at that, that has been mobilized rhetorically as propaganda to allow an entire group of disenfranchised individuals a common platform on which to project their anger.

22 Yet Obama's "blackness" works in other ways too, specifically via methods of projected African American solidarity. Among some mainstream African American leaders Obama has been posited as a (specifically black) savior for (specifically black) America. For instance, Reverend Jesse Jackson, Minister Louis Farrakhan, Dr. Cornel West, and Dr. Michael Eric Dyson, sat down on C-Span in March, 2010, at a forum called "We Count: The Black Agenda is the American Agenda," to engage in a debate of whether blacks' expectations of Obama are overblown. In the interview Dyson takes special pains to discuss his intimate, decades-old friendship with Obama. Dyson imagines them to be communicating via "that Negro intimacy that is communicated telepathically...[via] symbolic gestures." This supposed black communal affiliation "authenticates" their blackness and their legitimacy as the prominent articulators of the black political voice. Furthermore Dyson suggests that black expectations of Obama are not, in fact, overblown, because he is, clearly, the president for "black folk;" a man who "hollers at white folk, but winks at us." This external racialization of Obama as a specifically black subjective signifier is a projection of racialized solidarity.

23 Yet among these black intellectuals anxiety looms. Despite Obama's supposed symbolic "Negro" affiliations and loyalties, Dyson expresses concerns that Obama will go beyond "code-switching," which Dyson defines as "the predicate for acceptance in the larger circle of white supremacist logic so that you can then get in with the black voice" to "become those [Obama said] he was against to begin with." In other words, Dyson, reading Obama as bichromaticly racialized, is afraid Obama will switch from "black" to "white." As evidence of this potentiality, Dyson analyzes Obama's stimulus plan and its "real world" trickle down, or lack thereof to those most in need, claiming "even if it's a race neutral, colorblind distribution of resources, black folk aint getting' it." Dyson suggests that he's not situating this anxiety of Obama's "becoming" something that he's "not" in terms of a "black versus white" binary; rather, he's setting up a binary of "right versus wrong." However, because of the explicitly racialized language Dyson uses, it is difficult to not interpret his fear as anything other than a fear of Obama changing from "authentically black" to white.

24 As the C-Span forum demonstrates, many citizens expect Obama to identify himself as black, i.e. as African American, and in doing so he is expected to put "black concerns" at the forefront of his political agenda. Because he does not, his blackness—while benign enough for much of mainstream white America—is criticized by some mainstream blacks, such as Cornel West, for its "inauthenticity." Obama's postracial gesture of universalized nationalism is specifically criticized for its refusal to acknowledge real world problems of African Americans, such as joblessness and socio-economic disparity. Recall Jesse Jackson's accusation that "Barack's been acting white," and the moment during the campaign when he whispered into a still-live microphone on Fox News that "Barack's been talking down to black people...". This was Jackson's response to Obama's black church-held stump speeches wherein he supposedly denigrated black fathers. The

undercurrent of Jackson's comments can be read as an attack on Obama's inability to, or refusal to, engage in the hegemonic legacy of black civil rights as sanctioned by Jackson's and his predecessors' leadership. In other words, Obama fails to engage in African American solidarity, upsetting and confusing those who attempt to locate him within such politics by way of his external racialization.

25 As we know, Obama is more than "black" in the limited ways in which he has been imagined to be by the American media and by many Americans. This possibly complicates a narrative of African American racial progress seeking legitimacy in the figure of Obama as the first "African American" president. In a *New York Times* article, Orlando Patterson suggests as much, writing, "black America's view of [Obama] is clouded by the facts that he is the son of an immigrant and that he was brought up mainly by middle-class whites whose culture is second nature to him. Although the Congressional Black Caucus, still strongly influenced by the civil rights generation, remains surprisingly liberal on immigration issues, the black middle class appears to harbor a hardening anti-immigrant sentiment—a Pew poll last year found that 54% of blacks see immigrants as a burden (2009)." The anxiety over Obama's hybridity and its attendant proclivity for easy slippage in and of itself however could be indicative of the possibility for post-bichromatic racialization that exists within him. Thus, it is imperative that we make productive discursive use of Obama's hybridity by a twofold process. First, we need to continue to publicly decry postracialism as it has been imagined in limited ways thus far as it fails to be a self-critical discourse, and second, we must broaden the manner in which many read Obama's "race." He is more than the first "black" president in the limited ways that significance seems to be understood by the mass media and by many American citizens. Instead, we can read him as a hybridized man who has within himself mixed race, diasporic blackness, and second-generation immigrant identities. In this sense, Obama can perhaps be read as *post-racialization's* subjective signifier, which may allow for a transcendence of the dominant American bichromatic claim to discourses of race and blackness.

Beyond the Binary

26 It should be clear by now that at the heart of the discourse surrounding Obama's race is a question of authenticity, and it is crucial to reveal the artifice of such a monolithic concept if we ever hope to constructively critique bichromatic racialization. The manner in which Obama performs any given aspect of his race, ethnicity, or ancestral history does not make him more or less "authentic" as a member of any respective group, as is the case for any individual. Rather, what it means is that, as his "blackness" is destabilized at his own behest, and indeed, as all "blackness" is continually destabilized as a monolithic identifier, perhaps the notion of monolithic authenticity altogether will dissipate, and a multiplicity of "authenticities" can flourish. Of course, this is not to suggest that African Americans unilaterally consider themselves "one people," or a homogenous "black community." On the contrary, according to a 2007 report by the Pew Research Center, over one-third of African Americans doubt that the black population of the U.S. is any longer a single people (Hollinger 2008, p. 1034). As Hollinger points out, the Obama candidacy, and now presidency, was and is "a far-reaching challenge to identity politics...at the center [of which] is a gradually spreading uncertainty about the significance of color lines, especially the significance of blackness itself (2008, p. 1033).

This is not to suggest in any way that blackness is no longer related to racist mistreatment in the United States, nor is it to suggest that blackness is not a viable, critical tool to mobilize political solidarity and antiracist action. Indeed, Obama's presidency suggests the way in which blackness can be mobilized to diminish or intensify "authenticity" for specific political and critical projects, as it coterminously presents a challenge to any lingering sense of essentialized "authentic" blackness.

27 One can argue that the kind of universalized nationalism Obama advocates — in which people put aside their essentialized ideological identities in order to coalesce into nationalism — is his attempt to advocate for something similar to Édouard Glissant's poetics of relation, at least in its intention, if not in its result. Like Obama's attitude toward racialization, Glissant is anti-essentialist; he is keen to destabilize identity as it often coalesces into ideology. Glissant's theory instead rests on the assertion that meaning is developed only in the moments of relation; that is, in the moments in which divergent peoples and cultures intimately meet and intertwine. Glissant's poetics is mobilized at the moment when the practice of relation opens up a space of limitless possibility. In his universalized nationalism, Obama too is hoping to destabilize divisive racialization. However, by pushing nationalism as a means to engender a homogenized "Americanness," and in trying to destabilize identities rooted in what he deems to be unproductive differences, he is clearly not open to a critical engagement with post-bichromatic racialization. In other words, by failing to engage in a critical discussion of race, Obama forecloses a critical discussion of post-bichromatic racialization and the poetics of possibility it could offer.

28 While he may not be ready or willing to rhetorically advocate for such expansive possibilities in which we make cultural space for transformative meaning-making, Obama's identity in and of itself, examined beyond bichromatic racialization, allows for the identity rupture that Glissant's poetics are suggestive of. Glissant's poetics of relation is in line with the way black immigrant critics and scholars — such as Chude-Sokei, Benjamin Akande, and Patterson — see one potentiality of Obama's hybrid identity functioning. As evidenced by Saidiya Hartman's project in *Lose Your Mother*, much critical attention has been paid to African Americans in Africa, but little sustained attention has been paid to Africans in America. These aforementioned critics are striving to change this and to bring an awareness of the impact Africans, and other black immigrants, have in America.

29 Thus, we begin to see what "postracial" could mean in a broader conceptualization. I would like to address and extend the arguments of these critics to suggest, what if postracial, reconsidered as post-bichromatic racialization, could mean "post-black?"[1] To clarify, with the advent of increased immigrant blacks moving to the United States, and the election of Obama as a successful second-generation immigrant whose blackness is derivative of African, not African American ancestry, are we moving past an era, nationally, in which "blackness" is considered primarily synonymous to "African American?" What if postracial, reconfigured as post-racialization, could mean both exploding bichromatic racialization, as well disrupting a dominant African American claim to "authentic blackness?" In other words, what if the election of Obama as the first "black" president opens up a discourse of broadening the idea of "blackness" to include black immigrants, thereby reconfiguring the discursive meaning of "blackness" in an American context?

30 In his *Los Angeles Times* article "Shades of Black" Chude-Sokei sees Obama's hybrid identity, and the conversation it has the potential to engender, as an opportunity to disrupt dominant American bichromatic racialization (2007). Additionally, Chude-Sokei argues, it has the potential to disrupt the specific project of black American exceptionalism, in which blackness is synonymous with "African American." He writes:

31 Chude-Sokei sees Obama's non-African American-derived blackness as presenting a specific "challenge to conventional (i.e. American) racial and cultural categories" (2007). This challenge is necessary to engender a post-bichromatic racialized discourse, which in and of itself is necessary to allow more complex epistemological understandings of various selves and cultures in our transforming nation. Chude-Sokei suggests that by allowing a discourse of non-American conceptions of race to flourish, "a challenge to African Americans' cultural dominance, racial assumptions and politics [can't] be far behind." This is a critical move in the development of post-bichromatic racialization, which depends not only on disruption of external racialization, but internal as well (Chude-Sokei 2006, p. 16). Thus, increased attention to the cultural and historical significance of immigrant blackness might allow for something akin to post-bichromatic racialization. In other words, we are not moving into a colorblind era, but into a more culturally variegated color-conscious era. We are moving into an era beyond bichromatic racialization and the coterminous dominant American claims to racial authenticity.

32 In general, minorities comprise more than one-third of the United States population. Additionally, the latest census statistics from 2010 show that there are 40 million foreign-born citizens living in the United States. Studies show that most immigrants quickly "Americanize," and, regardless of their mother tongue, almost all immigrants adopt English as their first language and assimilate to American culture, particularly in the cases of second-generation immigrants. This is not to suggest, however, that immigrants completely abandon their indigenous cultures, nor, of course, should they. In this sense of balance, they exemplify Wise's suggestion of "illuminated individualism;" meaning many immigrants recognize and "perform" their multifarious identities as both Americans and people of different cultures, backgrounds, and ethno-racial makeup simultaneously (2010, p. 153). No one then, immigrant or native-born, is simply an "American," nor should anyone be solely defined by identity politics, if at all. Therefore we need a dialogue that moves beyond bichromatic racialization or universalized nationalism, because neither ideology reflects the complexity of subjectivities. Because of the damaging bichromatic hierarchy continually fostered in the United States, the roots of racism and identity politics run deep, and many voices, such as immigrants, have been silenced or left out of the conversation entirely.

33 In his essay "The Obama Generation: The Emergence of Africans in America," Akande suggests "[Obama is] a representation of the African immigrant population in the United States, [that] has been quietly emerging all along." In addition to Obama, he lists several prominent Africans in America, such as John Ogbu, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Hakeem Olajuwon, Joseph Addai, Gbenga Akinnagbe, and Akon. He writes, "The Obama Generation is a representation of African immigrants and their offspring, who are gradually establishing themselves as key players in the political, social, academic, and economic spheres of America. While their presence has been illuminated by the emergence of [Obama], their impact will continue for many years to come, regardless of this presidential election or any other" (2007).

34 As we see, Obama's hybrid identity needs to function in productive manners because otherwise "blackness" will more than likely continue to be primarily understood as African American and serve to reify bichromatic racialization. Many of the black American leaders whom history and the collective consciousness have consecrated as distinctly "American" have in fact been "cosmopolitan" or "diasporic," i.e. comprised of immigrant heritages and histories (as is the case, of course, for so many Americans). Although Chude-Sokei disagrees, Patterson argues that at one point in the mid-20th century these kinds of relational, diasporic interactions between various black peoples were inclusive to immigrants and were, often, highly productive socially, culturally, and politically (Chude-Sokei 2006, and Patterson 2007). Patterson suggests, however, that in recent years an American "nativism" has been reanimated, rendering immigrant identities unwelcome in an American context. Patterson writes, "this tradition has been eroded by a thickened form of black identity that, sadly, mirrors some of the worst aspects of American white identity and racism. A streak of nativism rears its ugly head. To be black American, in this view, one's ancestors must have been not simply slaves but American slaves" (2007). Thus, racialization remains a fraught, complex issue, and solicits a critique of simplistic postracial discourse.

35 While it is difficult to know exactly how a critical discourse of immigrant blackness might renegotiate or eradicate bichromatic racialization, scholars and critics continue to consider it with increased attention. By the very nature of Obama's hybridity and its intrinsic post-bichromatic racialization, Obama represents a potential disruption of the dominant American articulations of racialization, and by extension, allows for the hope of a new discourse of the legitimacy of different iterations of blackness and their influence on the cultural composition of the United States.

Toward a Discourse of Post-Bichromatic Racialization

36 To dedicate an entire journal issue to the question of "postracialism," as RRCA has done, begs the question: does race still matter; and if so, why, how, and how much? As we have seen, of course it does. Wise and Mukherjee remind us of the persistent familiar tensions which abound in the constant wavering about this very question (Wise 2010, and Mukherjee 2009). Because of historical bichromatic racialization in the United States, we continue to question the "primacy and persistence of blackness in constituting race and racial difference...and claims about the end of politics with the arrival of a postracial moment in U.S. racial history" (Mukherjee 2009, p. 220). Because "blackness is the pivotal concept in the intellectual and administrative apparatus in the United States for dealing with ethno racial distinctions...doubts about its basic meaning, boundaries, and social role [affect] ideas about whiteness, and all other color-coded identities" (Hollinger 2008, p. 1033).

37 We are not in a postracial era in which we are beyond race, and postracialism, as it has been posited by the mass media, is not a cultural conversation widely accepted or beyond criticism. What the question of postracialism strongly suggests is twofold: first, the election of Barack Obama has generated "a new and intoxicating feeling of optimism across race, class, and gender lines and pressed many of us to reassess, if not overhaul, our basic assumptions about the ways that 'race matters' in the 21st century" (Teasley and Ikard 2010, p. 412). In other words, the election of Barack Obama has allowed us to interpret race as functioning in *psychically* transformative ways unique to our

contemporary moment. Whether or not this will result in cognitive or structural change remains to be seen. Secondly, the question of postracialism has suggested that we must consider whether a reconsideration of variegated "blackness" has the potential to alter bichromatic racialization. I argue that Obama's election, and his symbolic signification, can offer salient opportunities for such critical discourse.

38 While we remain committed to the antiracist work of using "historical and cultural analysis to understand the social and economic circumstances facing Blacks and other non-Anglo racial/ethnic group members," (Teasley and Ikard, 2010, p. 414) as a means to fight racism, we are actively striving to imagine a way of constructing a society in which "race" as we've understood it historically, now functions in new ways, or not at all. Eventually this might look like a society in which bichromatic racialization may no longer be used as an external or internal method of organizing groups of people. It might look like a society in which racial categories are gradually exploded and expanded and understood solely in cultural terms, or, as in Hollinger's notion of "postethnicity" (2008, 2011), as understood by an individual as having little to no effect on one's self-perception whatsoever.

39 Indeed, a concept of post-bichromatic racialization is rife with complications and contradictions, and there are disconnects between the desire for a race-free society, and the reality of such a possibility. It is imperative to not romanticize self-determination and, in doing so, ignore continuing race-based social inequities. Much in the way that postracialism renders antiracist conversations mute, a non-critical post-bichromatic racialization discourse can also pose problems for still critical color-consciousness and antiracist work. Yet might a paradigm shift in the manner in which we at least understand President Obama as "postracialism's subjective signifier" allow us to begin to re-imagine our society? In other words, might such antiracist work eventually become less needed if the manner in which society is racialized becomes less bichromaticly hierarchical, and, by extension, possibly less racist?

40 By the very nature of his intrinsic hybridity, Obama has the potential to symbolically disrupt the notion of the postracial as "colorblindness" and instead, to use Glissant's phrase, "explode" bichromatic racialization. In this way Obama represents a discourse of the legitimacy of diasporic identities and modes of relational meaning-making always functioning and circulating transnationally, including, of course, in an American context. This is a post-American discourse, in that it challenges most forms of racialization and postracialism put forth throughout American history. A discourse of post-bichromatic racialization potentially opens up a space for new articulations, including, possibly, a space for intraracial expressions of difference that don't necessarily need to be reinscribed in modes of black solidarity (Gilroy 2000). Anthony Appiah suggests as much, writing, "'Race' disables us because it proposes for a basis of common action the illusion that black (and white and yellow) people are fundamentally allied by nature and, thus, without effort; it leaves us unprepared, therefore, to handle the "intraracial" conflicts that arise from the very different situations of black (and white and yellow) people in different parts of the economy and of the world" (1993, p. 176).

41 By using Obama as a means to articulate post-bichromatic racialization, we are doing what Appiah calls for when he writes, "We...need to show not that race and national history are falsehoods at best—or—at worst—dangerous ones: [but] that another set of stories will build us identities through which we can make more productive alliances" (1993, p. 175). Likewise Glissant hopes for the "conciousness of Relation to become

widespread, including both the collective and the individual" (1997, p. 27). By using Obama's hybrid identity to open up a potential discourse of post-bichromatic racialization, we allow for a much needed legitimizing of immigrant identities and variegated subjectivities within the American context.

42 Obama himself acknowledges this potential when he realizes that the importance his father represented was not solely his immigrant, African identity in and of itself, but the way in which his father's identity allows for "changes [to take] place in the people around him" (1995, p. 25). This allowed for the transformation of "racial attitudes" (1995, p. 25). Like Obama's father, Obama himself has the potential to represent a transformation of dominant, American racialized, or postracial discourses. As Glissant writes, "when we speak of a poetics of Relation, we no longer need to add: relation between what and what...because what it relates proceeds from no absolute, it proves to be the totality of relatives, put in touch and told" (1997, pp. 27, 28). "Not knowing this totality," Glissant confirms, "is not a weakness" (1997, p. 154). Thus, perhaps the gesture of post-bichromatic racialization is not to come to a unified consensus or solidarity imagined by way of productive racializations, but to imagine a space of new epistemological possibilities of freedom realized through a conscious, and critical, disruption of hierarchies and binaries.

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NOTES

1. In the late 1990s, Thelma Golden, the curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, coined the phrase "post-black" with artist Glen Ligon to describe artists who did not feel inclined to affiliate themselves or their work with "black" racialized classifications. The term was explained in depth in the 2001 catalogue for the Studio Museum's exhibition "Freestyle."

ABSTRACTS

According to many in the American and international press, the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama has heralded a possible era of "postracialism" in the United States. The election, and Obama himself, has given this term social capital worthy of deep consideration. If we understand "postracialism" to be congealing into a "color-blind" ideology that ruptures the historic hegemony of the bichromatic (black-white) American binary (as some journalists posit) we have to look at media discourses that position Obama as "postracialism's subjective signifier" to understand postracialism's failure to function as it's imagined to do so.

Far from accomplishing a simplistic and idealistic end to discourses of race and practices of racialization in America, postracialism has served to reify public racial obsession, and Obama has been made the locus of attention on which these discourses circulate. Obama is consistently conscripted in racialized projects from those individuals and groups attempting to use him to advance their political cause. Obama is also actively engaging in a discourse of universalized nationalism that uses color-blindness to articulate itself.

This article will seek to complicate mass media articulations of the postracial, to help broaden it from what appears to be its limited lines of inquiry. Perhaps the salient question to ask is whose "postracialism" are we referring to, and what might this term signify if we imagine it to mean more than what it clearly is not? Might we read postracialism as an articulation of "post-black," if we consider "black," in an American context to be historically understood and legitimized as African American? In other words, might "postracial" have salience as a means to invite a larger cultural conversation of different articulations of blackness in America, one in which immigrant

blacks are considered and given voice? This is a particularly relevant question in relation to Obama due to his second-generation immigrant identity, and due to the fact that his "blackness" comes not from African American ancestors, but from his African father.

This article aims toward a meditation of the potential for immigrant blackness to offer a more inclusive, and more accurate representation of a progressively variegated, "post-racialized" American culture in need of social legitimacy for its potential to disrupt bichromatic racialization and coterminous universalized nationalism.

INDEX

Keywords: 2008 presidential election, African Americans, American media, Barack Obama, bichromatic racialization, blackness, immigrant blackness, immigrants, post-black, post-race, post-racialization, postracialism, race, racialization, United States, universalized nationalism

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